




# Waking Up to Data

PRIYANKA BORAR



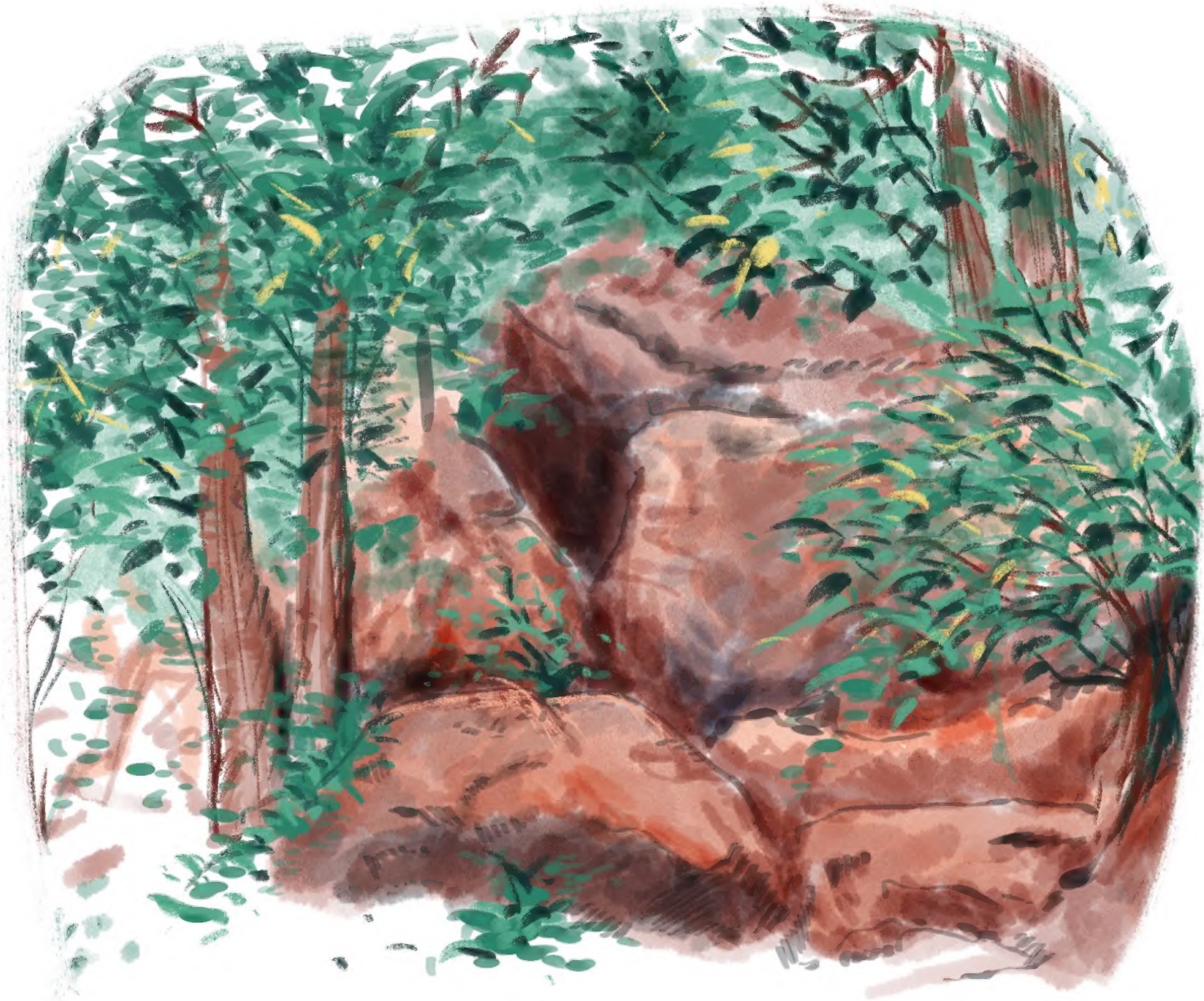




*I woke up from sleep,  
surrounded by trees.*

*I couldn't recall  
how I got there and  
what place is this.*

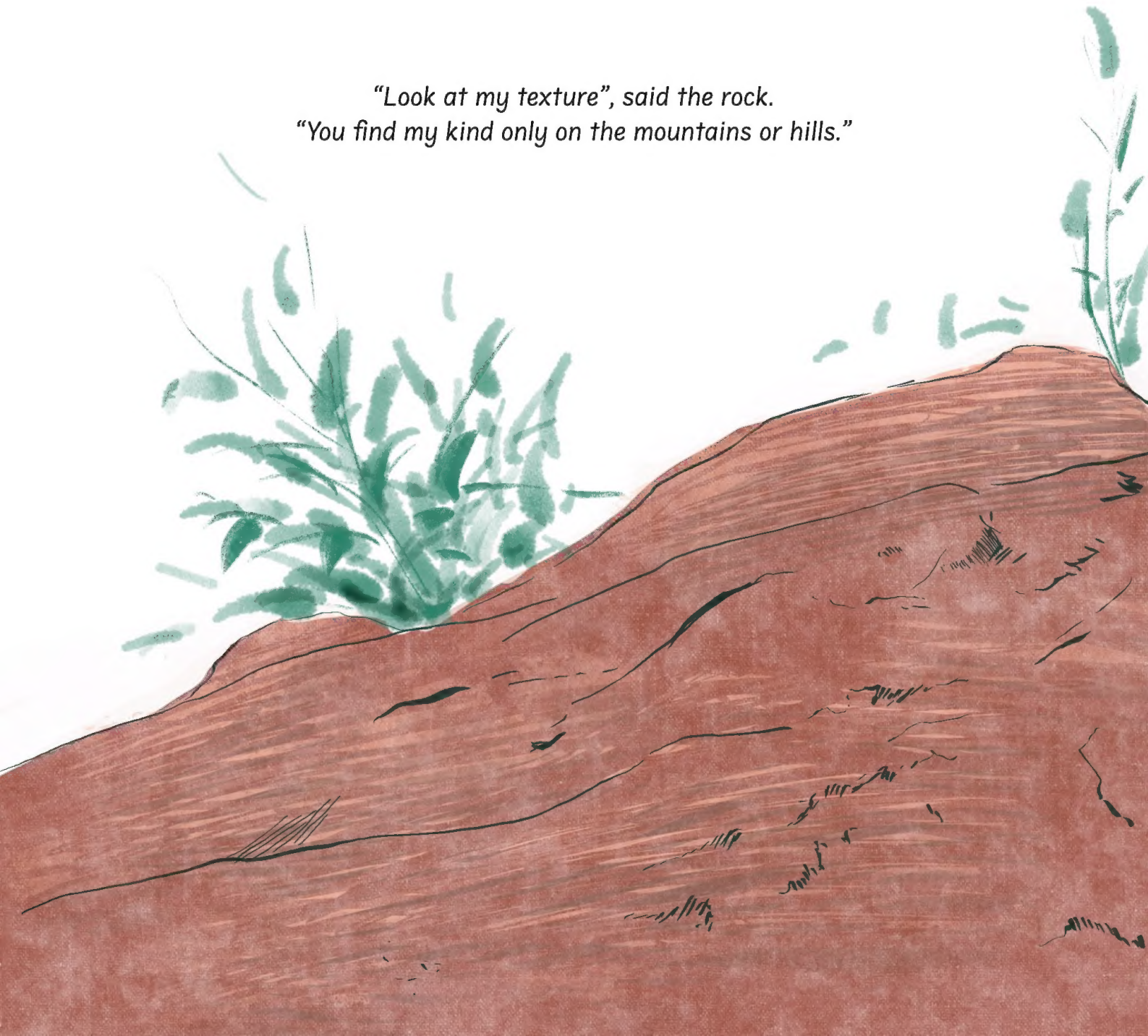




*I asked the rock in front of me,  
"Where am I?"*



"Look at my texture", said the rock.  
"You find my kind only on the mountains or hills."



*"The dog here might be able to tell you more."*





"It definitely smells like my territory", said the dog, sniffing the air.

"Also smells like a forest for a long stretch around us."






*"Wait, I smell something else too.  
It's a herd of sheep coming towards us."*

*I asked the shepherd,  
"what place is this?"*

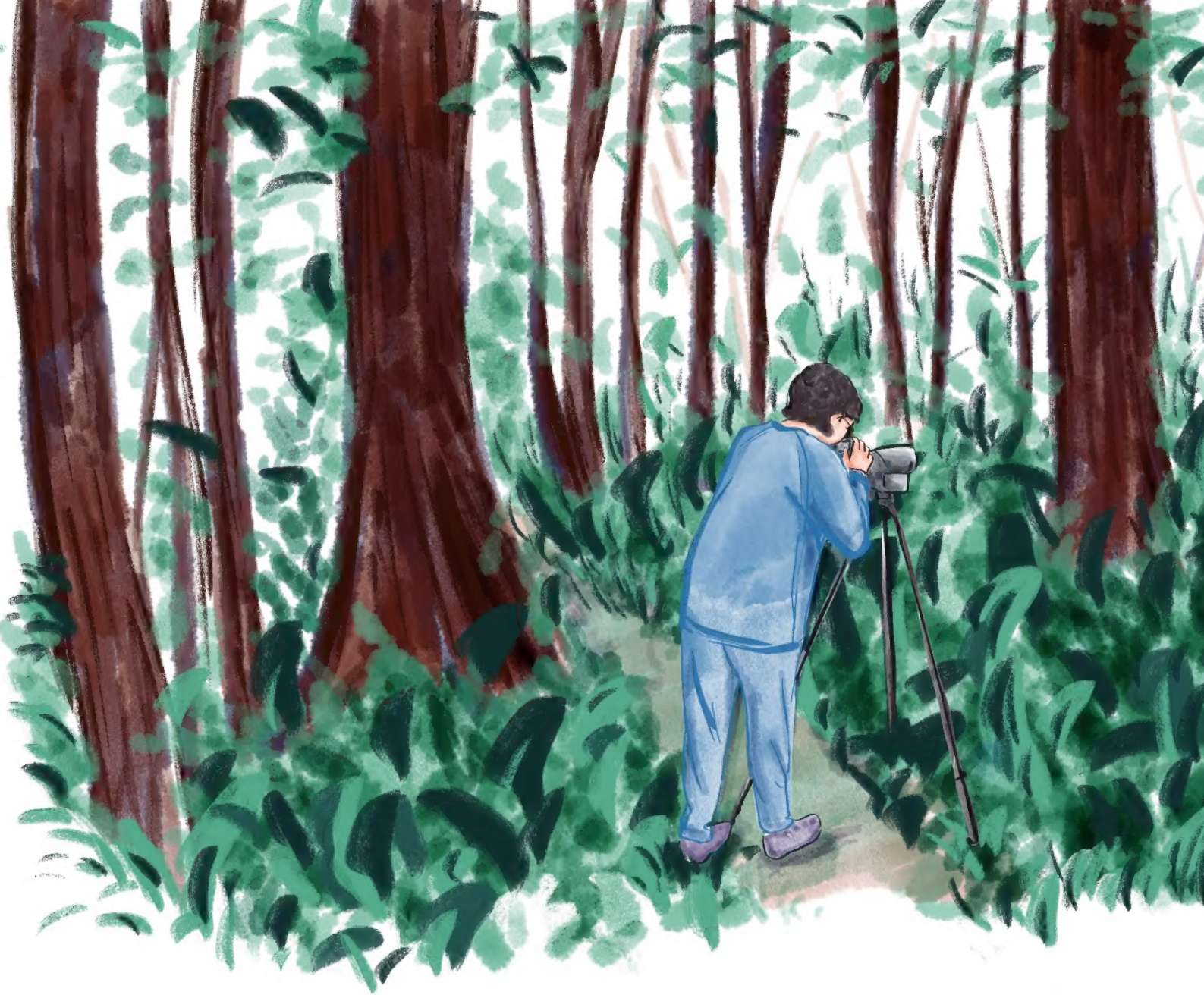




An illustration of a forest scene with several sheep grazing. The forest floor is covered in dense green foliage. Tall, thin tree trunks are visible in the background. A flock of sheep, rendered in a light tan color, is scattered across the scene. Some sheep are facing left, some right, and some are looking down as if grazing. A large, white, cloud-like speech bubble is positioned in the upper center of the image, containing text. The overall style is that of a children's book illustration.

"We are close to the sacred groves. If you keep following the path the sheep have grazed, you'll get there."



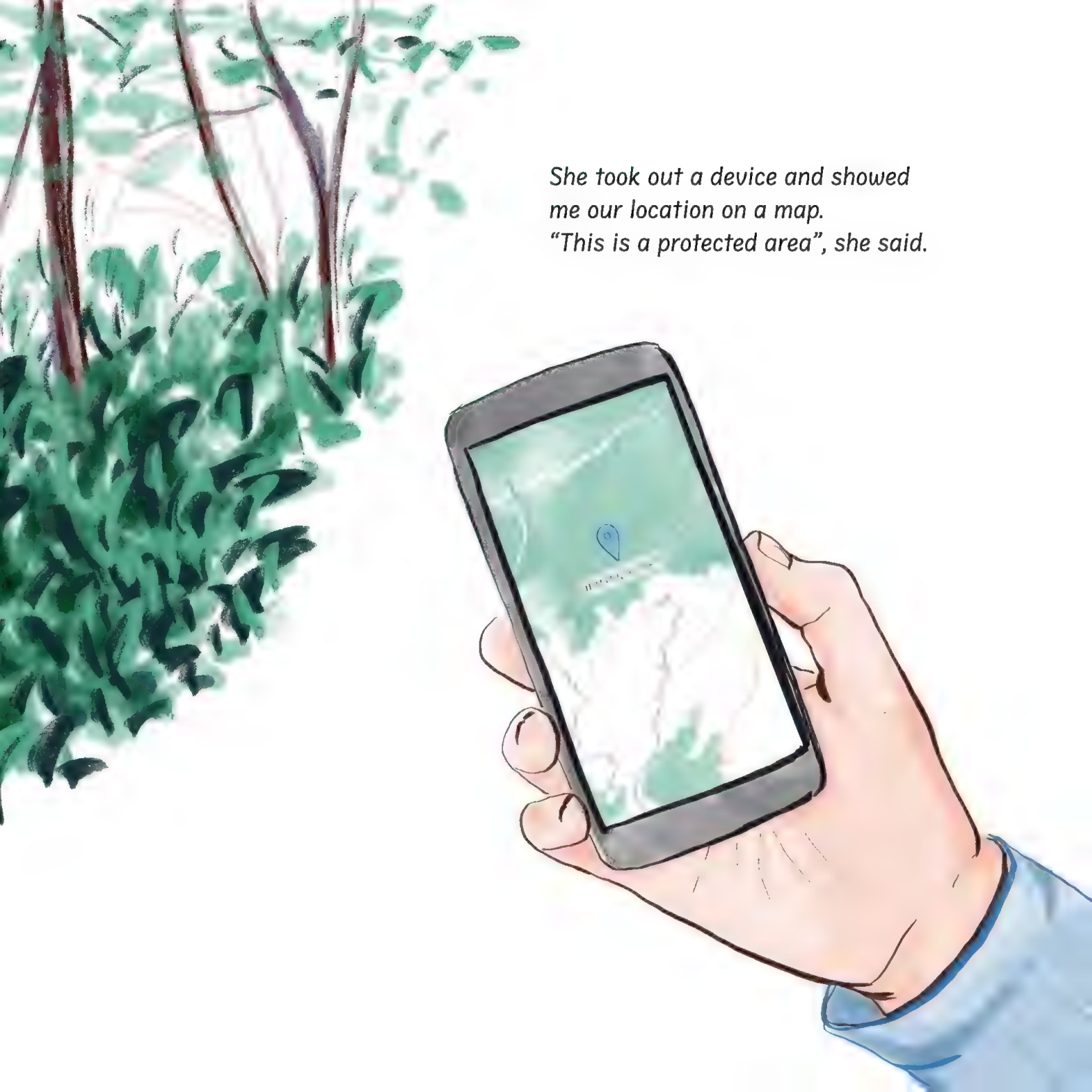


*So I kept walking on the  
path made by the sheep.*

*I met a researcher looking at a  
tree. I asked her, "where are we?"*



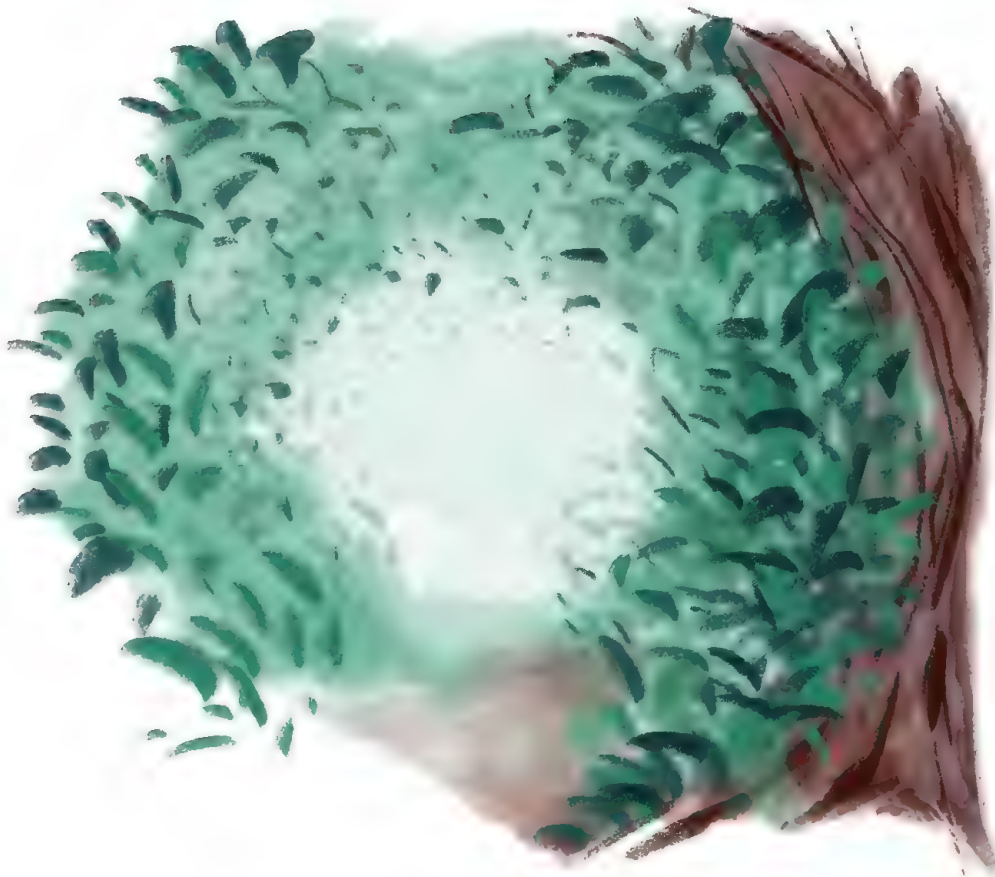
*She took out a device and showed  
me our location on a map.  
“This is a protected area”, she said.*



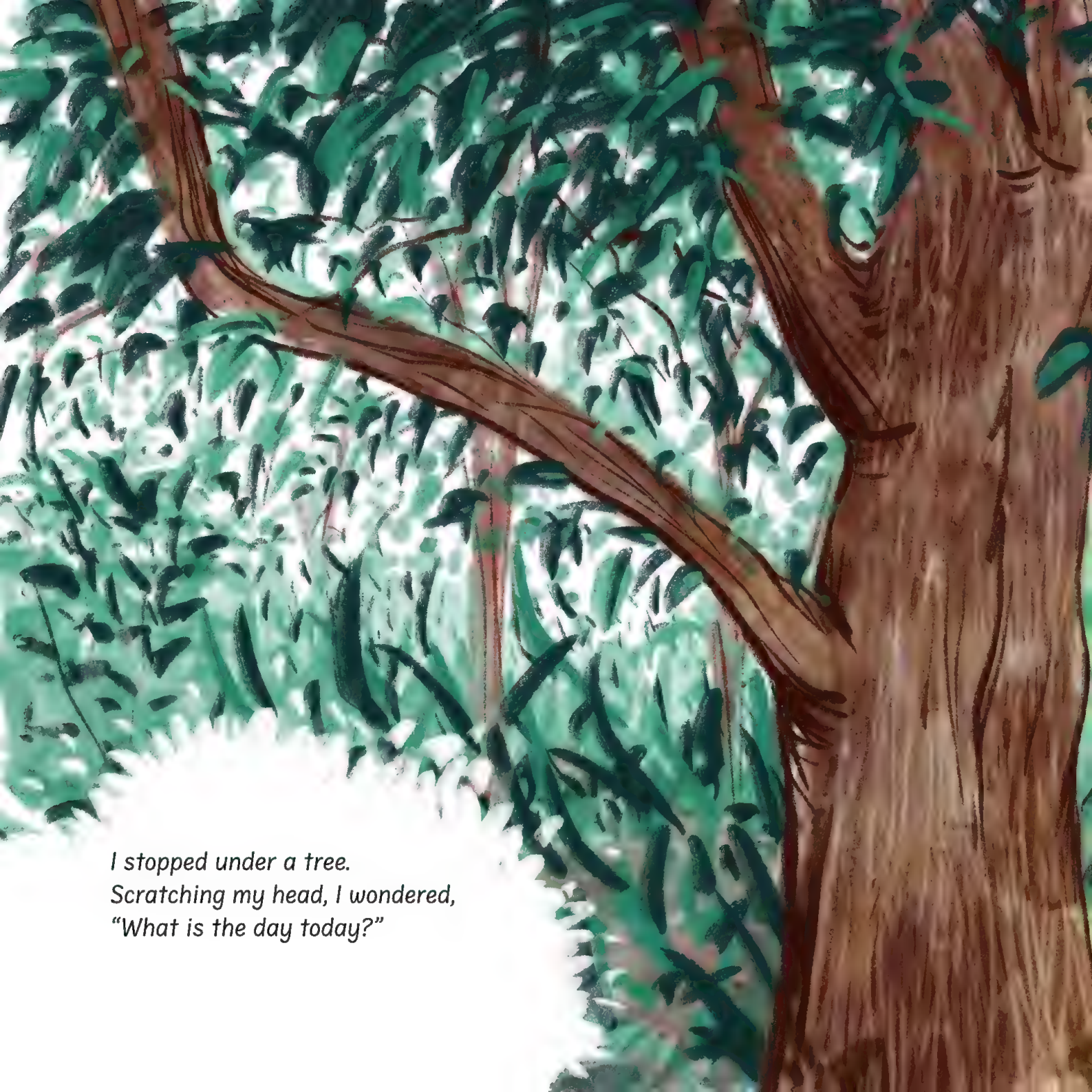
Data is all around us. Anything that can be observed, sensed, or recorded is data. Sounds, textures, patterns, smells - they are all data trails.

Digital Data can easily travel across devices. We need to put it in context though, to make sense of it.






*I kept walking,  
like I was walking out of a dream.  
Slowly coming to senses, I realized  
I had no idea of the time.*

A painting of a tree with thick brown branches and dense green foliage. The tree trunk is on the right, and a large branch extends from the left towards the center. The leaves are a vibrant green, and the background is a soft, hazy green, suggesting a forest setting.

*I stopped under a tree.  
Scratching my head, I wondered,  
"What is the day today?"*





*"It's a summer day", said the tree.  
"I've been tracking. I keep a  
record of days in my heart-wood."*

*"Come, check it out.  
You see these rings – there is one  
for each year I've seen. The dark  
areas are added in summer and  
the lighter ones in spring."*

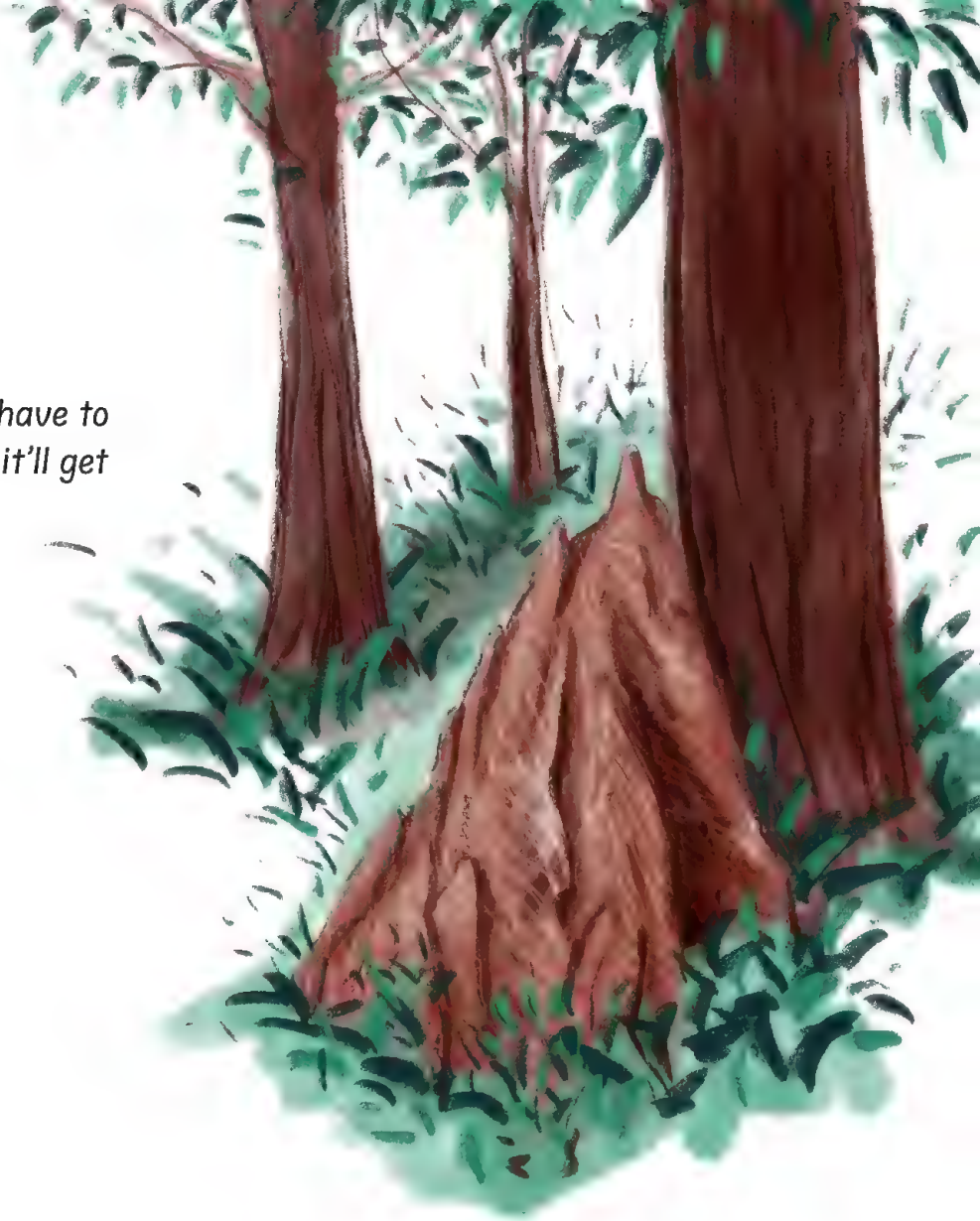
*"By counting the rings  
you can tell my age. I am.. "*

*"It's going to rain today", an ant interrupted. "Don't waste time, child, go find shelter."*





*"I can feel it in the air. I have to  
go cover my nest or else it'll get  
flooded."*

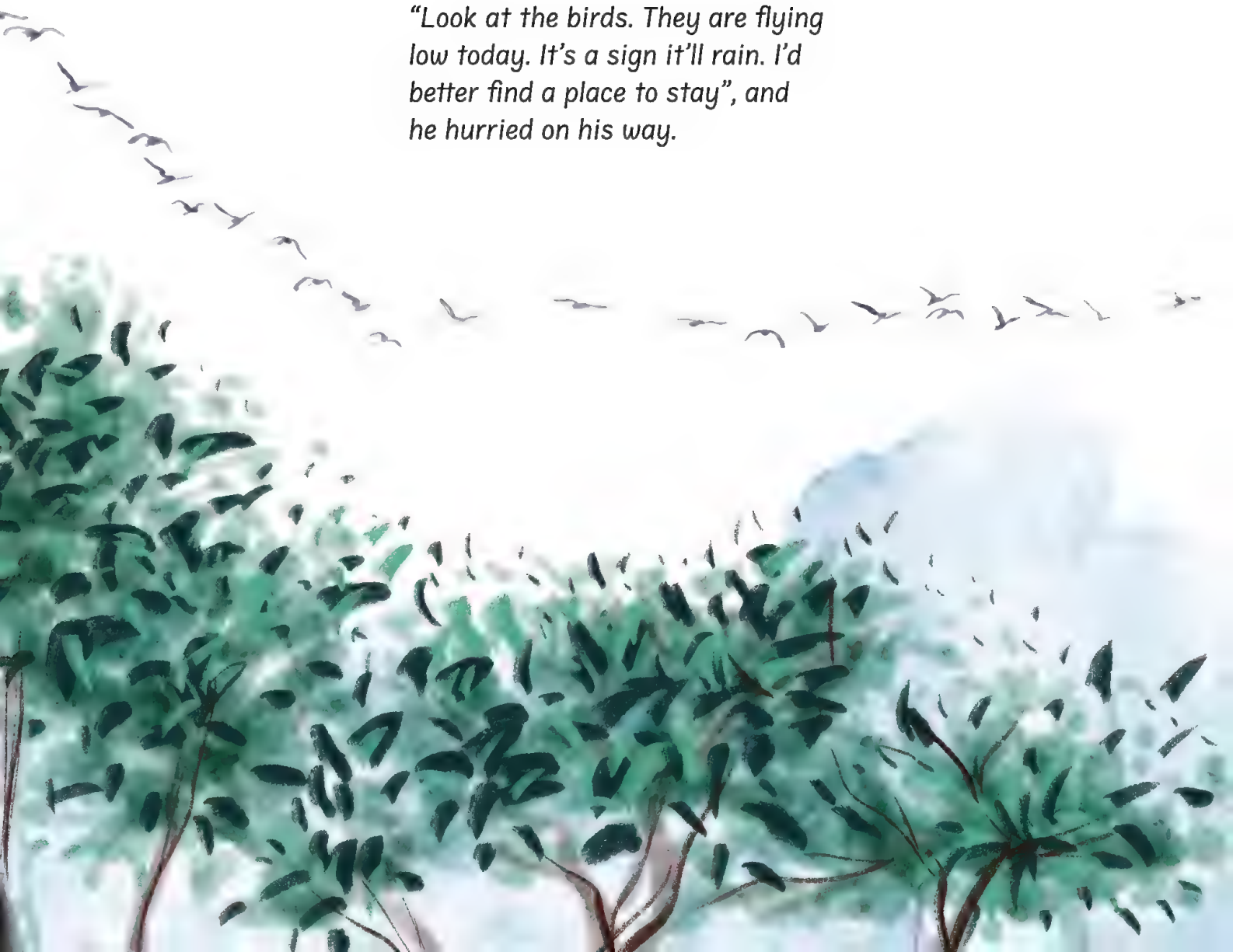


*"Yes, it's definitely going to rain",  
said the traveller who overheard  
our conversation.*





*“Look at the birds. They are flying  
low today. It’s a sign it’ll rain. I’d  
better find a place to stay”, and  
he hurried on his way.*

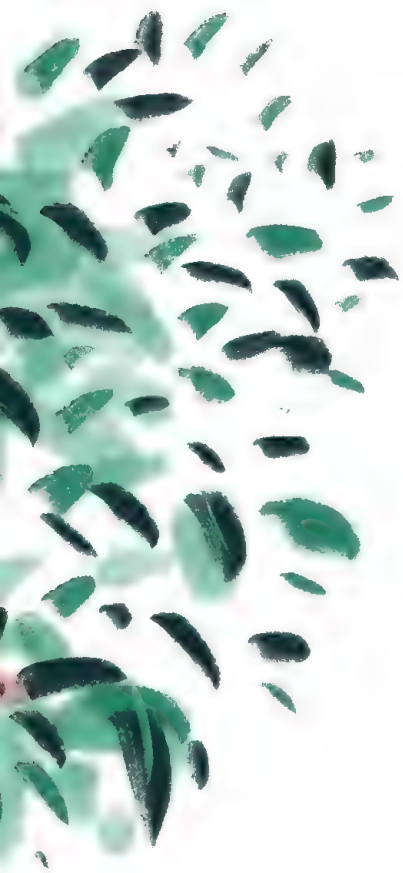




*Just as he left, I saw a school teacher coming towards me. He stopped to ask what was I doing there alone.*

*Still dazed, I just said, "what is the day today?"*

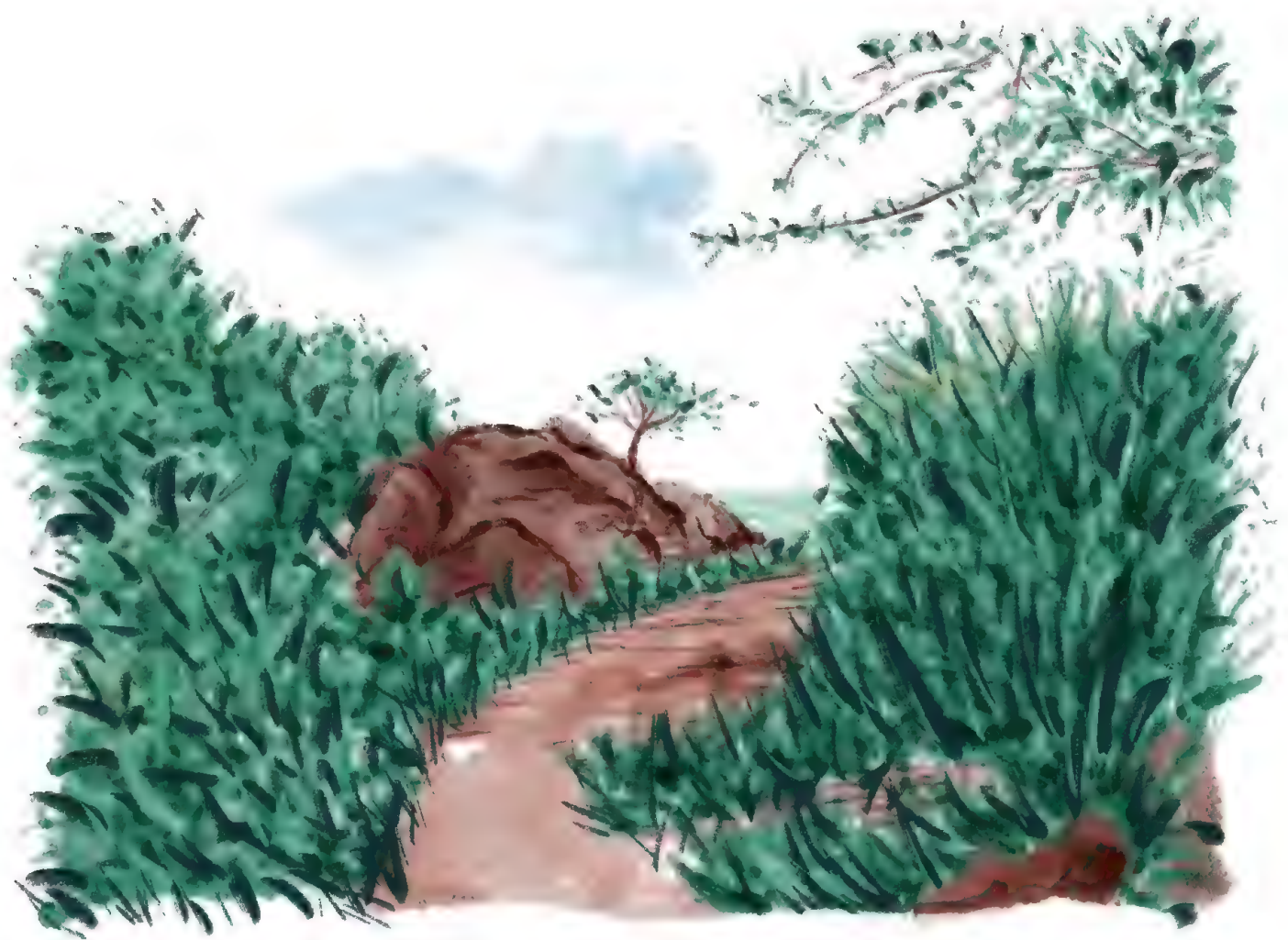




*He looked at his watch and said,  
"it's July 30th. Schools are  
reopening from next week."*



*"But what are you doing here?  
Where is your home?"*



*"Where is my home? I don't remember.  
I don't even remember who I am?"*

*The teacher asked me to come with him till his  
village. Someone there might identify me.*

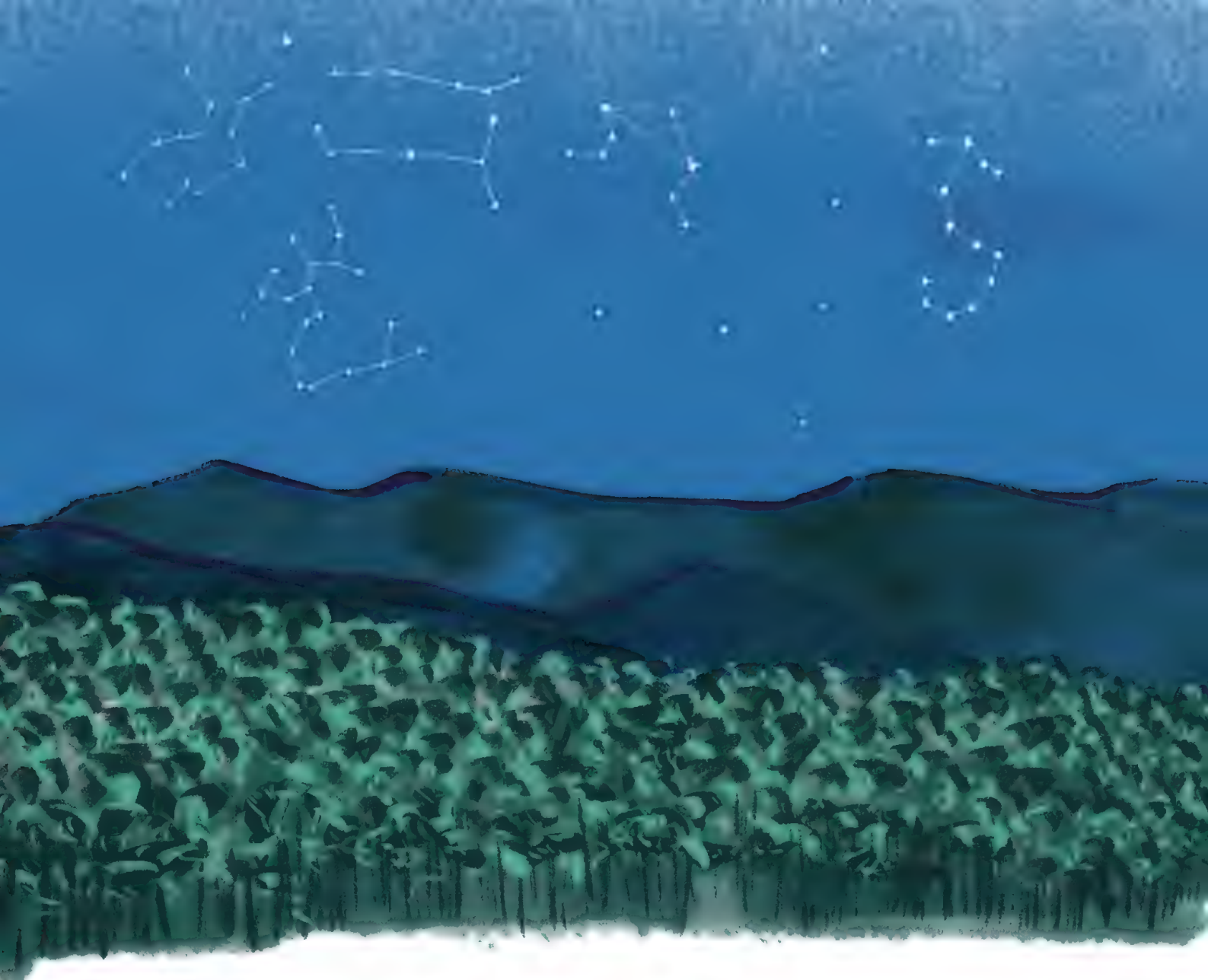


There are many ways to observe  
and show data. It takes different forms  
based on who is looking and how.  
This also affects how we read and  
understand data.



*We walked towards his village. It had started to get dark. I looked up and asked the stars, "who am I?"*





*The stars twinkled and did a little dance, making shapes in the sky.*


*“When you were born, the sky looked like this. Sun in Scorpio, moon in Leo. You have..”*

*We were stopped by a forest officer. The teacher told him he is trying to find my home.*

*The officer pulled out a device with a camera and scanned my face.*







*"I have found her Govt. ID.  
Let me look for her address."*

*He kept clicking the screen.  
But he couldn't find my  
address.*



*Just then an old lady arrived.  
She identified me from my clothes  
and appearance.*





*"I know her village. I'll take her home."*



Sharing data can help form a  
better understanding of the context and  
make better decisions.  
Cooperative data-sharing can enable us to  
move towards a collective intelligence.





*Many thanks to PCC, The New School, for supporting this book by providing me with a dynamic learning environment during ICDE fellowship '23-24.*

With “Waking Up to Data”, Priyanka Borar crafts a respectful and poetic ode to the concept of data, gently set amidst India’s rural forest communities.  
– R. Trebor Scholz

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Priyanka Borar is an artist and designer from India working at the intersections of technology and society.

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